

Yoga and Ayurveda: A Call for a Complete Yogic System of Medicine

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The Yoga Tradition

Yoga and Ayurveda: A Call for a Complete Yogic System of Medicine

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Abstract: To bring out the full healing potential of Yoga, what we need is not just Yoga therapists applying the tools of Yoga according to the guidelines of Western medical doctors. What we need in the long run are Yogic doctors who can diagnose and treat disease according to the Yogic medical system of Ayurveda. This article explores the separation of Yoga therapy and Ayurveda in the West and how they may be brought together.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Yoga, medicine

The effectiveness of a therapy depends upon the medical system according to which it is prescribed. In this regard, the question arises: What medical system is Yoga therapy depending upon for its diagnosis and treatment-and is that medical system in harmony with Yogic principles?

There is a comprehensive medical system-one of the oldest in world-that is based on Yogic principles. It has a long history of usage with Yoga and is in resurgence today. This is the Ayurvedic system of medicine of India, which remains commonly practiced in India and is now spreading worldwide.

To bring out the full healing potential of Yoga, what we need is not just Yoga therapists applying the tools of Yoga according to the guidelines of medical doctors, however helpful that can be. What we need in the long run are Yogic doctors, Yogic physicians who can diagnose and treat disease according to a medical system that is Yogic in nature. That Yogic medical system need not be invented. It is already here in the form of Ayurveda.

Such Yogic doctors would not only prescribe the tools of Yoga like âsana and prânâyâma but would also know how to employ the methods of natural medicine like diet, herbs, and massage. Their diagnosis would be based upon Yogic principles and would recognize the role of consciousness as the prime factor in our well-being. Combining Yoga and Ayurveda can provide the foundation to create such Yoga doctors who can revolutionize healthcare in the world.

To put this into perspective, let us examine the relationship between classical Yoga and traditional Ayurveda. Classical Yoga arose in ancient India as a spiritual practice, or what is called in Sanskrit a sâdhana tradition. It does not aim at the treatment of disease, but at Self-realization beyond the body and mind, the Purusha of Yogic thought. That is why traditional Yogic texts say little about disease, diagnosis, or treatment.

In the system of Vedic sciences that classical Yoga is part of, Ayurveda is the branch that specifically deals with physical and psychological disease and focuses on treatment chikitsa in Sanskrit). When Yogic texts address health issues, they usually do so according to the terminology and approaches of Ayurveda. Even Buddhist and Jain traditions in India and Tibet, which have Yogic aspects, rely on Ayurveda for their medical applications.

Ayurveda, we could say, is the traditional Yogic system of medicine. It takes the philosophy, principles, and practices of Yoga and orients them towards the healing of body and mind. It extends the Sâmkhya philosophy, on which classical Yoga rests, into an integrated system of mind-body medicine. It takes such prime Yogic principles as Purusha, Prakriti, the five prânas, and the five elements and shows their implications at the level of health. It provides a sophisticated view of anatomy, physiology, constitution, and the disease process through such factors as the three doshas (biological humors), seven dhatus (tissues), and the srota or

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channel systems. It considers the role of the mind, meditation, and the Purusha, or higher Self, for both mental and physical health. Ayurvedic practitioners, particularly those trained in traditional Ayurveda, commonly prescribe Yoga practices of âsana, prânâyâma, mantra, and meditation, along with natural healing methods of diet, herbs, and massage.

When Yoga came to the West in the twentieth century, not much Ayurveda came along with it. This was due in part to various historical influences, such as the closure of Ayurvedic schools by the British during their colonial rule, and the ascendancy of allopathic medicine. People in the West found great health benefits in Yoga and wanted a medical

application for Yoga. Not finding a specific system of medicine in the Yoga that they learned, they sought to adapt Yoga to modern medicine.

After around 1970, when alternative medicine began to spread, Yoga practitioners sought to ally Yoga at a health level with alternative systems like naturopathy, chiropractic, massage, herbal medicine, and Chinese medicine, which seemed to fit better with the naturalistic approach of Yoga than did modern Western medicine. It was only in the mid-eighties that Ayurveda began to be taught in the United States. By this time, the basis of a new Yoga therapy had arisen, which was largely apart from Ayurveda and not aware of its principles.

Because of this historical situation, many people today believe that Yoga therapy is one thing and Ayurvedic medicine is another. Owing to the ascendancy of allopathic medicine even in the Indian context, some modern centers of Yoga therapy in India have emphasized Yoga therapy along with modern medicine and have not given much attention to Ayurveda either.

However, this situation has been changing in recent years. Ayurveda is becoming more common and popular in Yoga centers in India today, with large new centers like Patanjali Yogpeeth in Haridwar (now the largest in the country) including a full range of Ayurvedic practices. This trend is slowly extending to Europe and North America.

Now that Ayurveda is available and its connection with Yoga is becoming clearer, it is important that Yoga therapy in the West brings more Ayurveda into its application. There are several areas in which Ayurveda can be very helpful.

First, Yoga therapists can benefit from learning the Ayurvedic view of the body and mind and of health and disease, including individual constitution and Ayurveda's naturalistic approach to living. Studying the Ayurvedic view of anatomy and physiology, constitution, and the disease process, which follows the energetics of prāna, will greatly enhance the Yoga therapist's view of disease and how to treat it in a Yogic manner. Studying the Ayurvedic view of how physical diseases are connected to psychological diseases and lack of connection with our inner consciousness (Purusha) will greatly expand the realm of Yoga psychology.

Second, it is helpful for Yoga therapists to learn the role of Ayurvedic therapies that work well with Yoga therapy, including diet, herbs, massage, and pancha karma. Yoga therapy can be more effective if applied along with Ayurvedic lifestyle guidelines and treatment measures.

Third, it can be very helpful for Yoga therapists to use Ayurvedic treatment protocols for the application of Yoga therapies like āsana and prānāyāma. Just as it can be helpful when recommending āsanās to know the diseases a person may be suffering from according to modern medicine, so too, the Ayurvedic constitution and disease imbalances of a person are quite relevant.

The postures, prānāyāma, or meditation that may be recommended for a person with high vata dosha, for example, naturally will be different than those for one with high kapha dosha. These Ayurvedic guidelines can help Yoga therapy be more attuned to individual needs and differences. Even for people suffering from what is the same disease according to modern medicine, like rheumatoid arthritis, Ayurveda with its more specialized diagnosis can provide additional insights

as to how to manage the disease at an individual basis.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Ayurveda provides another set of guidelines for applying Yoga therapies; not just âsana, but all the eight limbs of Yoga. Ayurveda views the yamas and niyamas of Yoga as the basic principles of right living for both physical and psychological health for everyone.

Ayurveda views âsana as the "external medicine" of Yoga, useful primarily for musculoskeletal disorders, but having an indirect value for most health problems, specifically for vata dosha, the biological air humor.

Ayurveda regards prânâyâma as what we could call the "internal medicine" of Yoga. From an Ayurvedic perspective, more emphasis should be given to prânâyâma because it has a greater ability to affect the internal workings of the body in terms of respiration, circulation, digestion, and the transmission of impulses through the nervous system. Prânâyâma works on prâna, which is directly connected to vata dosha, the most important of the three doshas, and has a strong therapeutic value in reducing kapha dosha, which causes diseases of mucus and congestion in the stomach, lungs, and heart.

Pratyâhâra, with its reduction of sensory overload, is a key factor in stress reduction and is emphasized in Ayurvedic

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sensory treatments and massage. Indeed, the patient who receives a deep oil massage in Ayurvedic treatment is also being given a pratyâhâra therapy. Pratyâhâra is central to healing because it allows the healing prâna to be taken within, rather than dispersed outwardly.

Yogic concentration, mantra, and meditation practices are important for treating all psychological disorders, according to Ayurveda, and are a necessary part of any healthy lifestyle for body and mind. They not only help to balance the doshas but also to increase sattva guna, the quality of inner harmony, balance, and contentment that is another important concept in both Yogic and Ayurvedic healing.

These are but a few brief examples of how Yoga and Ayurveda can work together. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a future for Yoga therapy in which Ayurveda is not a key component. Ayurveda can help us add the medical background, diagnosis, and greater treatment options that can make Yoga therapy part of a full Yoga system of medicine.

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